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# The Importance of Local History.

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There are few branches of knowledge whose importance has been so generally and justly extolled, as that of History. From the days of Cicero, who proclaimed it to be "the light of truth, the life of memory and the preceptress of life," the world has been accustomed to bear its praises and listen to the recital of its powers. History has been justly termed "philosophy teaching by example," and in a broad sense "the whole past course of humanity from the first moment of its existence to the present hour.

The love of history seems inseparable from human nature. It is natural for man to preserve as far as is in his power the memory of those of his own time and of those that preceded it. Rude heaps of stone and earth have been raised and ruder hymns or rhymes have been composed by nations who had not yet the use of arts and letters. An application of the study of history that does not tend to make us better men and better citizens is at least but an ingenious sort of idleness; and the knowledge thus acquired is at best a creditable kind of ignorance. The study of history, however, of all others is the most proper to train us up to private and public virtue.

Important, however, and instructive as is the narrative of past events and the influence they have exerted on the world in civilization and refinement, history is seldom so interesting as when descending from the loftier and more splendid regions of general narration, it dwells for a while in an humbler place, and delights in the details of events of every-day life, and of the history of the people.

"The struggles of empires and the convulsions of nations," says a writer, "while they have much of sublimity have also much of

uncertainty and indistinctness. They are too large for the grasp of ordinary minds, or too indefinite to act on common sensibilities; while the interests awakened by the details of local history are such as from the facility of comprehension and the identity of the objects presented, must necessarily come home at once to the feelings of every reader. They place us by the firesides, or walk with us among the graves of our fathers, attaching a living story to the thousand inanimate objects with which they are surrounded."

Under all forms of government, in this country, whether colonial, provincial or republican, many important measures have been submitted to the primary assemblies of the people to be examined and acted on by them. Thus we find in the revolutionary war, in particular, towns and parishes not only expressed their opinion on many subjects connected with that event, but they actually exercised much of the jurisdiction of a national government in prosecuting that war. How these small corporations organized solely for municipal or parochial purposes, transacted that business in that war, as well as the more subsequent ones, in procuring soldiers, stores and the means for carrying them forward is well known.

"The great object of local history," says Mr. Shattuck, "is to furnish the first elements of general history, to record facts rather than deductions from facts. In these small settlements dotted over this country (as well as others) are to be found many of the first moving causes which operate upon and revolutionize public opinion. Many facts, minute in themselves, and regarded by many as trivial and unimportant, are really of great service. The details, which it is the appropriate province of the local historian

to spread before the public, are not so much history itself as materials for history. It is the work of the general historian, who has before him all the particulars of the great natural and political landscape, to exhibit the connection of the several parts and to show how they depend one upon another in bringing about the great changes which have been taking place and affecting the condition of society."

No people in the world can have so great an interest in the history of their country as that of the United States; for there are none who enjoy an equally great share in their country's historical acts. The histories of Bancroft, Hildreth and others have a world-wide reputation. The histories of the War of the Revolution, the War of 1812, the Mexican War and the War of the Rebellion have found able and impartial writers, and there is perhaps no nation in the world whose history has been more fully written and with which the people are more familiar. The histories of the individual States of the Union have been written by competent parties, detailing their rise and progress from early times to the present, and in a spirit of enlightened liberality many of the States have made generous appropriations for publishing their colonial records. The States of New York, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Connecticut and Rhode Island have done nobly in rescuing from oblivion their early documentary history, and furnishing an example for imitation by other States.

John Quincy Adams once made a remark which contains a world of truth: "That posterity delights in details." And it is highly creditable to the intelligence of the American people, that so much of the early history of the towns and villages of the country has been written, and nothing comes closer to the sensibilities of the people than the details of events that occurred when their fathers or ancestors were on the field of action and took their part in building up their several locations. This attachment to our homes is a wise provision of Divine economy. It is eminently proper that every person should entertain a particular attachment to the place where he was born, and where he has made his home. Change of location does not always wean the affection away from the old fireside. By the aid of memory, we are

privileged to call back the early bygone scenes, and appreciate the lessons we received that had so important a bearing on our subsequent life.

To trace the history of our ancestors, and transmit a record of their deeds to posterity, is a duty we owe to the past and to the future. Such a record must be preserved as invaluable by the immediate descendants and kindred of those who once lived and acted where they now do, and whose ashes repose in their soil, and it cannot be without interest to those who have gone out from their kindred to dwell in other parts of the country, nor to those who have come to dwell in the habitations made vacant by the removal or death of the original occupants. What the present place of our residence once was, who originally occupied it and by what means and by whom it has become what it now is—are questions which can be answered only by minute topographical history.

No part of the United States has received more attention from writers than the New England States. The last twenty five years have produced the local history of more towns and cities in that section than any part of the country. The people of New England have a history going back over two hundred years, and the inhabitants justly take pride in what their own towns have done in reclaiming the country from barbarism and what they have since performed for the public good.

Other States of the Union have realized in a more or less degree the value of these local histories.

The State of New York, though for a long period indifferent to the subject, has of late years found devoted antiquarians who have brought to light much information that had been for a long period buried in oblivion.

To Joel Munsell, the veteran printer of Albany, that city is greatly indebted for the reproduction and translation of her early annals and subsequent history, and to give some idea of what has been published and is accessible to the inquirer, some statistics of the local history that can be found in the library of the State Historical Society are here given. Of the State of Massachusetts there are 125 bound and about 300 unbound books and pamphlets of her local history, consisting of town and county histories, centennial

and anniversary discourses ; of the State of New York about 200 ; Connecticut 125 ; Pennsylvania 70 ; Ohio 75 ; Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont about 60 each, and lesser numbers of the other States. The whole number of volumes and pamphlets numbering over 1,000.

It is interesting to note the fact that many town authorities have liberally encouraged this kind of literary labor. Prof. J. D. Butler informs the writer that the selectmen of the town of Bradford, Vt., in accordance with the vote of the inhabitants, contracted with Rev. Dr. Silas McKeen to write the history of the town, and to pay him \$500 to publish it. We find also that the town of Pittsfield, Mass., in 1866, appointed a committee to compile, write and supervise the publication of its history ; and Hon. Chas. Hudson has prepared two large octavo volumes of the histories of the towns of Lexington and Marlborough, Mass., the manuscripts of which were purchased by the authorities and the work published at their expense.

Centennial celebrations of the organization of towns in New England have been held in many towns, and funds raised by subscription to secure the publication of their local history ; and our worthy friend Cyrus Woodman, of Cambridge, Mass., formerly of this State, appreciating the value of the published records of his native town, Buxton in the State of Maine, has published a volume of its history at his own expense for private distribution, and other instances of this kind might be mentioned.

Turning our attention to our own section of the country we find that Wisconsin and Minnesota have made an excellent beginning in this department of history, and made more progress, perhaps, in proportion to their age and population than many of the older western States. Michigan has done less than Wisconsin, a matter of surprise when it is considered what might have been accomplished in that flourishing State if proper attention had been directed toward it. In our State there have been published in proper form for preservation, histories of the counties of Brown, Crawford, Dane, Door, Rock, Fond du Lac, Green, Green Lake, Oconto, Pierce, Racine, St. Croix, Sauk, Walworth and Winnebago—these are in pamphlet form and a portion of them designed for immigra-

tion purposes, but contain much that is valuable. There are also histories of the towns of Ashland, Baraboo, Beloit, Elkhorn, Green Bay, Hudson, Janesville, Kenosha, Madison, Milwaukee, Mineral Point, Nashota, Oshkosh, Prairie du Chien, Plymouth, Prescott, Racine, Stevens Point, Watertown, White-water, and perhaps some others in pamphlet form, and some prepared for the collections of the State Historical Society.

There are also a few towns whose local history has been published in a series of articles in the newspaper press. These articles have been collated, neatly mounted and bound in volumes. Of this class may be mentioned the "History of Plymouth, Sheboygan Co.," by Mrs. H. N. Smith ; the "History of Geneva, Walworth Co.," by J. Simmonds ; "Early Reminiscences of White-water," and a valuable series of papers on the "History of the Chippewa Valley," by T. E. Randall. Of the larger class of works may be named "History of Milwaukee," by Dr. R. A. Koss, in the German language, 472 pp. 8o ; the "Chronicles of Milwaukee," by A. C. Wheeler, 303 pp. 12o ; Guernsey and Willard's History of Rock Co., 192 pp. 8o, and the recent "History of Madison and the Four Lake Country," by D. S. Durrie, 420 pp. 8o.

It will be seen from what has been written that while the State of Wisconsin has made some progress in preserving its history, there is still very much to be accomplished. The materials for the preparation of works of this kind are now available, but may not be many years hence. Every village, or city in this State has a distinct history of its own. Parties are now living who came here as pioneers,—the history of their experiences and hardships should be preserved, as well as the progress and growth of their several localities. These men are passing away, some to other homes, and others soon will have finished their earthly labors and gone to the world unseen.

This work, however, must be done from unselfish motives. It is useless to disguise the fact that the labor of collecting the materials and preparing the same for publication, brief and imperfect as they may be, is one of magnitude. No one until he has tried the experiment can fully appreciate the labor and patience which are requisite in connecting

isolated facts, and the perplexity which is caused in reconciling apparent contradictions and removing doubts. Such kind of labor is never remunerative, but the consciousness of having redeemed from undeserved neglect the history of our homes and of our forefathers, and rescuing from oblivion many facts which would otherwise have been lost, will be a source of gratification if no other reward is received.

We wish we could suitably impress the importance of this subject on the attention of the people of this State and in fact on all others. In almost every locality there are persons interested in history; let such persons cultivate their gifts by collecting materials of the early settlement of their places of residence and subsequent progress, and prepare the same for publication. Should there not be sufficient encouragement to publish such a history in a volume, the editor of

your county paper will gladly publish it in his paper, even if continued for a long series of numbers.

The Historical Society is desirous of collecting every thing that has a bearing on the history of the State, general or local, and fully appreciates the labors of those who feel disposed to "gather up the fragments" and the library of that Society is rich in such collections. If in your power to add to its usefulness (and the benefit for the Society is for the benefit of the whole people) the Society will be thankful for your co-operation.

Of late years it has been the custom in some places to have annual gatherings of the old settlers to recount their experiences. It would be well if the custom could become universal and a printed account of the same preserved. How valuable such papers would become in after time, no one can fully appreciate.



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